

# 3 Things the Military Taught Me About Being a CEO

Picture this: You've just carried a gun 10,000 feet up the rocky terrain of the Himalayan mountains. It's windy and freezing cold – with temperatures reaching as low as -40 degrees celsius at night. Through the cracks of your mud and pinetree shelter you can see enemy soldiers on the other side of the line.

That was my experience as a member of the Indian military. I spent 10 years in the army, going from foot soldier to officer to major. It was no easy experience. Ultimately though, my time there trained me for my role as a CEO today.

When I initially made the leap into business, I was worried I wasn't prepared. It turned out that my military mindset was ideal for the C-suite.

Former military men are common fixtures in boardrooms. In fact, veterans have been at the helm of 10 different [Fortune 500 companies](#). It makes sense – the army trains people to be great leaders, to be disciplined, and to work as a team among so many other [transferable skills](#).

Here are 3 lessons that I took with me when I transitioned from the battlefield to the boardroom.

## Lesson 1: Whip yourself into shape before you start making demands of your troops

I was made an officer at 20 years old. Leading a platoon at such a young age has quite the learning curve attached to it. Not to mention the intense pressure knowing that I was responsible for people's lives.

It was quite the struggle to get my troops to take me seriously since I was so young. It wasn't uncommon for me to give a command and get ignored. I soon realized that you don't demand respect – you earn it. And respect is earned by doing the work required of you and leading by example. I began demonstrating the behaviour I wanted to see and that made all the difference.

When my co-founder and I first started our business we did everything ourselves. Design, development, support and implementation – you name it, we did the task. Typical founders, we were always the first in the office and the last to leave. It wasn't uncommon for us to work 16 hour days.

As we began to make hires, new recruits worked alongside me and learned my processes. They saw firsthand how I researched clients thoroughly before sales calls; listened more than I talked

in meetings; and how I planned out detailed steps to make our company goals actionable. I showed the team the quality of work I needed from them.

Now, in the throes of the Great Resignation, one of the biggest reasons people are quitting their jobs is due to [bad management](#). Good managers lead by example, they pull their weight and put in just as much work as anyone else.

Recently I worked late to help an employee finish writing a proposal for a client. I think the team sees my dedication – and more importantly, my willingness to get into the trenches with them. If you're struggling with leadership, get on your team's level and model the behaviour you want.

## Lesson 2: Facing a problem? You need to be quick under fire

You have to think fast on your feet in the military. Decisions and reactions can't be hummed and hawed over – lives are at stake!

You'll never have all the information you'd like to have before making an important decision. But the worst mistake you can make is staying put.

My business started out as a consultancy. But we wanted to branch into developing a software platform. Similar to many young companies, we were short on cash. When it comes to funding, only about [3 percent](#) of people looking for substantial outside resources actually secure it. My team was among the other 97 percent.

Developing our new software platform was going to use up the last of our money. At the time I wasn't even paying myself – instead using that money to pay my employees. We had maybe a few months of runway left before we'd be forced to give up and find new jobs. Despite the pressure and time crunch, we decided to design the new platform anyway.

We'd done our market research and could see that this product was going to offer a solution that few other companies could provide. It worked out! The new platform helped us grow our business *and* get ahead of our competitors – all because we were able to make a decision quickly.

## Lesson 3: An army of one can make the difference

Sometimes in the military you get troops assigned to your platoon who are aggressive, angry, and difficult to manage. Someone like that, in the wrong spot at the wrong time? It could be a risk.

But by managing them well I could get very dedicated soldiers. I had to take that high energy and put them on time consuming and difficult tasks. Showing that I trusted them swapped the rebels' aggression with dedication. They returned that trust and respect and never flinched even in tough times.

Fast-forward, to when my organization first started out, this came into play. We were struggling with lead generation because we didn't have any SEO. We were basically unsearchable – meaning we landed few paying customers. We could have built up our SEO with content to draw in leads, but that would take time we didn't have.

We'd heard about this scrappy tech startup that used AI to find leads. It was 2014 and AI wasn't really a thing, yet. They weren't getting any attention or respect. But we looked at what they were offering and saw the potential, as new and untried as it was. It did work. The money started to roll in shortly thereafter.

What I learned long ago in the military still holds true today in business: strong leadership and making the most of your troops can help you take the high ground, faster.

Leaders don't like the unknown – be it in the military or business. Sometimes that can be just what you need in a time of crisis though. You need someone who is capable of taking a risk or approaching the problem from a different angle. One of the best things you can do is take your wild card individual and put them in the right role. By showing that you trust them, I've found that those outliers can be the best return on investment – they're the kind of people who can deliver miracles.